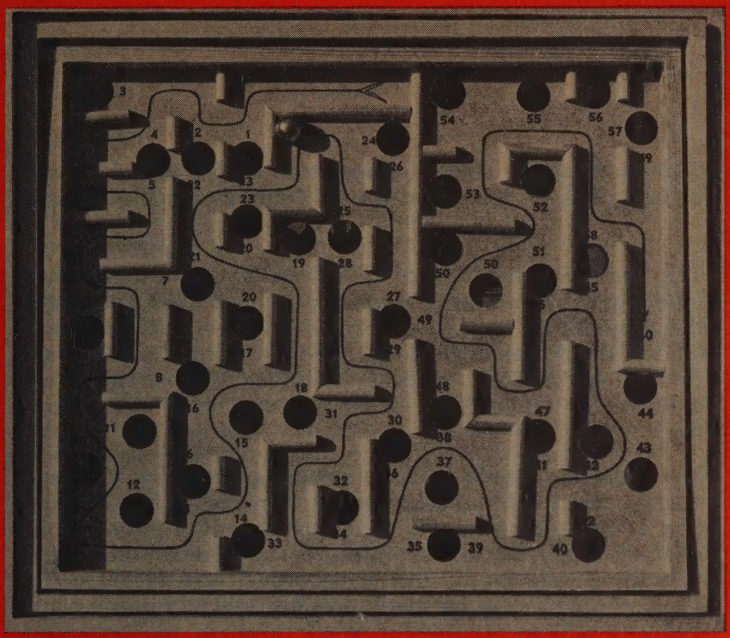

THE FUTURE OF MAN AND SOCIETY IN A WORLD OF SCIENCE-BASED TECHNOLOGY

PROSPECTUS FOR AN ECUMENICAL ENQUIRY · DEPARTMENT ON CHURCH AND SOCIETY · WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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Statement of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches on the Need for an Enquiry on «The Future».

The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Canterbury, England, August 1969, welcomes the proposal of the Department on Church and Society to launch an ecumenical study on «The Future of Man and Society in a World of Science-Based Technology», and asks for the cooperation of the member churches in carrying it out.

The steadily increasing development of science and technology poses a great paradox for mankind: it is the condition of man's survival and at the same time it threatens his destruction. It becomes therefore more and more urgent that we should clarify the issues which are involved, the choices which must be made and the ethical criteria which apply. It will necessitate a re-appraisal of the traditional views of man and of the inherited structures of society. There is clearly a pressing need for this ecumenical study on the implications of science-based technological change for the future of man and society proposed by the Department on Church and Society.

The study will take up a theme which emerged at the 1966 World Conference on Church and Society, the importance of which was reaffirmed at the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1968) which spoke of the «sense of urgency — at times almost a note of desperation. This is created by two new factors: the revolution in technology and the demand of peoples for social justice».

Such an enquiry must seek to determine how the potentiality of modern technology can be employed to overcome rather than accentuate economic and social differences between classes, peoples and nations. This could be a major contribution of the World Council to the struggle for world economic development and racial justice. The study should draw together laymen from the natural and social sciences, with theologians and students of Christian ethics, and seek to represent many different situations and points of view.

M. M. Thomas, Chairman

Eugene Carson Blake, General Secretary

World Council of Churches

Geneva, Oct. 1969

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I. Dilemmas of a Future-Oriented Society

Humanity faces an unprecedented situation. The opening of a new era of space exploration, and the scientific discoveries which have made it possible, highlight both the vast potential of technology **and** the need to which it is being and will be put. The scale and speed of the development of science-based technology are different from that in all previous epochs. 80% of the scientists who have ever lived are alive today; the amount of scientific information doubles every ten years and developments in some sciences in less than that period are equal to those which have previously taken centuries. The whole world is vitally affected by the constantly enlarging scope of science-based technology.

Thus, man has unprecedented power to change and develop his environment. Assuming that there is no large-scale nuclear warfare, the speed of change will continue to accelerate. The wealth of the «developed» world allows ever greater resources to be devoted to the development of science and technology and to institutionalizing the process of invention. The effects of this spread everywhere; no part of the world can be isolated from them. As a result the future presses upon the present and faces us with immense challenges.

But we are also faced with great dangers. Some would maintain that it is wrong in principle to investigate and release the powers of nature for human use on such a scale. Others believe that man is called by God to a responsible stewardship in this domain, but because men in their sinfulness can misuse these powers for far greater destruction than heretofore, the problem of their control is also more critical than ever before.

Yet the world lacks adequate international structures to cope with this situation. Technical development is fragmentary and its consequences are often not sufficiently explored. Whilst science-based technology and the ability to predict on the basis of it grow rapidly, the ability to use it for agreed social purposes grows much more slowly and the necessary changes in social institutions and structures come slower still. People lack the basic information as well as the ethical criteria for making responsible choices between the new options which technology makes possible.

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* The prospectus for this study was prepared by the Working Committee of the Department on Church and Society, meeting in Zurich, July 7–12, 1969. See pp. 10–12 of this brochure for a list of committee members and consultants.

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In this situation human attitudes vary. Most, although not all, want the products of technology. Some put too much confidence in science; others are distrustful of it. Many are fearful of change, and threats of possible disasters increase popular inhibitions.

Moreover, these new technological possibilities are not accompanied by the necessary political, economic, and ideological changes. It is the realization of this contradiction between the power and the will of mankind to share these possibilities with all men which summons the churches to undertake this reflection upon the future. «Futurology» is therefore for us not a question of curiosity, whether optimistic or catastrophic, but of imaginative insight and involvement.

The future of the world is dominated not only by the threat of mass destruction but even more by the growing gap between those who benefit from the industrial society and those who are excluded, both in the developed and in the underdeveloped countries. Among the problems posed in a new way by the explosive scientific-technological potentialities is that of the ownership, control and direction of means of production so as most effectively to promote full and just human development for all men in their diverse circumstances and cultures. Both centrally planned socialist economies and those based on private enterprise face this issue in a new way in a technological age.

There must therefore be new thinking about the shape of responsible society, because the accumulation of the technological change, of itself, does not solve the problem; in fact, without responsible controls, the technological-scientific revolution can accentuate and even increase the present tensions.

Methods must be found to make possible the participation by less developed countries in technological change, not only by making the fruits of such progress available but by promoting their active involvement in those areas of special importance to them. It will be intolerable if a relatively small minority of mankind continues to determine the direction and pace of the development of the world's natural resources. It raises the prospect of a further increase in the gap between rich and poor and of exploitation of the rest by the technologically advanced.

II. Scope of the Programme

Christians are bound to ask about the meaning of this amazing technological change and its consequences for their understanding of their faith in God. And the Churches are challenged by this explosion of knowledge and skills to enlarge their theological perspective in relation to man's increasing technological ingenuity and scientific imagination. They have to arouse their members to respon-

sible participation so that the potentialities of the future may be realized and its dangers averted. The Churches should encourage Christians to cooperate with creative social movements for building a more just society nationally and internationally so that an equitable sharing of the fruits of modern technology may be possible. They have also to develop structures and forms of organization which are open to the future and therefore appropriate for meeting the spiritual needs of men in this new age.

It is envisaged therefore that this study should have three parts:

- The Prospects of Science-Based Technological Change
- The Problem of Social Justice in a Future Perspective
- Theological and Ethical Questions (including key ideological issues).

A. Prospects of Technological Change

A great range of problems demand attention and one of the first tasks in the study will be to select the most critical from such concerns as:

1. the need for a positive policy with regard to environment including protection against pollution and other side-effects of a technical civilization;

2. population and world food supply;

3. the establishment of national and international structures of justice so as to relate technological possibilities to the social aspirations of mankind;

4. the problem of the influence of military power and concerns on technological development;

5. planning for urban development in view of the crises which rapid technological change creates and the clash of interests in city life;

6. the new challenge of space and the oceans;

7. implications of progress in genetic and biochemical research for the control of human life or its improvement, for example for birth, life (including longevity), mood control, and death;

8. the stress on consumption and the creation of new consumer demands arising from the productivity of modern science-based industry;

9. the revolution in producing and storing information, techniques of communication, and their consequences for education and influencing public opinion (e. g. impact of television on traditional social institutions, the family, political organizations, etc.).

B. The Problem of Social Justice in a Future Perspective

Among the political-economic issues to be explored are:

1. the impact of technological change on patterns of ownership and control of industrial production and the consequences for our understanding of the responsible use of power in economic affairs;

2. the challenge of technological change to traditional patterns of political organization and decision-making; the need for new forms of political participation in complex societies dominated by technical experts and mass communication; the challenge to classical patterns of democracy;

3. the results of technological change for narrowing or widening the economic and political gap between the rich and the poor nations;

4. transformation of the ideas involved in «the rule of law» to meet the changed conditions of a technical society;

5. non-violent forms and strategies for effecting revolutionary social change;

6. the social and human consequences of increasing leisure and decreasing need for work;

7. the disenchantment of many youth with the present and the options they propose for the future.

C. Theological and Ethical Questions

A proper theological understanding of the Churches' responsibility for man's future may most creatively emerge from the encounter of Christian faith and tradition with various ideologies and with the insights of the social and natural sciences. This will involve dialogue with certain points of view: science-based technological planning; revolutionary ideologies, Marxist and others; perspectives on the human future arising from other religions and cultures; insights derived from experience in political, economic and social leadership at various levels of society.

Three forms of openness for the future are important for Christian understanding and action: 1. projection of future possibilities on the basis of present trends in a strictly predictive sense; 2. anticipation of possible structures of the future which a worthy human life would make imperative; 3. presence and expectation of the coming Kingdom of God in judgement and redemption.

It is in the second of these that the most urgent theological tasks arise, though the first and third provide essential insight and guidance. Our problem is to discern in the light of the Gospel what realistic hopes we may have for

human society in the midst of its present crisis and possibilities so that the Churches, and all men of good will, may be moved to turn these hopes into reality. For this, careful theological work must be done in the following areas (in close collaboration with those working on parts A and B):

1. The meaning of justice in a technological age, and the effects of advanced technology on the human and natural environment; the question of human rights and freedoms is a part of this issue.

2. The function and control of technological, economic and political power in the interests of human welfare. To this question belongs the problem of legitimate authority, its role and limits.

3. Radical social change and the forms it may rightly take in the light of God's purposes.

4. The form which a truly human life in society may take in the future given a proper understanding of man, his motivations and his destiny. The role of racial and cultural differences in defining this humanity is one critical issue. The restructuring of human life by technological determination of environment and by bio-chemical interference with the human body itself is another issue (e. g. if one can construct any psyche desired, how does one discern what the true meaning and end of human life may be?).

5. The question of the forms of human community which the future will bring, and the forms of Christian community within it. Theology is not only words; it is life. Careful attention must be given to the forms of the Christian community of the future which will be witnesses to the Kingdom it anticipates, and transformers of its environment.

III. Procedure

The first step in this ecumenical enquiry would be to get a **description** of the ways in which technological progress goes on in the areas mentioned above, what options there are at each step and their implications, and who decides between these options. This would include a study of the criteria which are at present being used and the conflict of concerns and interests which emerge. It would involve an examination of the roles played by local and national government, by science-based economic enterprises working under competitive conditions, the armed forces, universities, scientific foundations and institutes, professional societies, and individuals.

The second step would be an attempt at **evaluating** the process of technical development in terms of human survival, social justice and the search for a balanced growth and healthy environment. One of the objectives of this enquiry would be to clarify the ethical options and the reli-

gious and secular criteria by which choices are made among various possibilities offered by technical change.

The third step is the **organization** of action at various levels. It is important that such action be ecumenical and be seen to be ecumenical. Local congregations and parishes might be encouraged to get together and tackle the problems of their communities. And the same applies to national actions. Scientists and technological experts should be consulted and drawn into these actions as much as possible. The World Council of Churches has a special responsibility in organizing thought and action on problems that can be dealt with only internationally.

IV. Immediate Steps

The preceding paragraphs express the broad lines of our strategy. This study will differ from previous Church and Society programmes since it will involve contact with scientific and technical disciplines relatively new to World Council concerns. Therefore a preliminary period of three years for exploration, research and consultation will be required, to be followed by a further two or three years of international debate, publications and major conferences. The immediate tactical steps envisaged for the first three years are as follows:

a) During 1970 contacts with interested individuals, groups and centres in various parts of the world, followed by an international seminar of natural and social scientists, experts in science-based industrial technology, leaders of institutes on the future, government planners and theologians to prepare a clearer definition of the challenge of science and technology for the future of man and society.

b) Publication and circulation of material designed to inform and arouse public opinion in and outside the Churches (including a contribution by the Churches to the worldwide discussion stimulated by the U. N. Conference on the Environment planned for 1972).

c) In 1971 three specialized consultations (perhaps on a regional basis) on «the Future of Man and Society».

d) During 1971—72 a colloquium on the political, social and economic implications of rapid technological change, in relation to the Christian concern for social justice. This would bring together scientists, political leaders, economists and theologians.

In view of the scope of this programme, planning for it will be done in close cooperation with other departments and divisions of the World Council.

Representatives of the Roman Catholic Church have helped us in drawing up plans for this enquiry and expressed the desire to cooperate at the various stages of its implementation. The issues at stake in this enquiry make it indeed necessary for the Churches to reflect, act and speak on as broad a platform as possible.

V. Mobilizing Resources

If the Churches are to be equipped to exert a Christian influence in shaping the changes and to perform a ministry of reconciliation in resolving the tensions, a major effort will be required. This means the mobilization of large new resources in men and money.

The initial period of study and preparation for the enquiry can be financed with available funds. However, to carry through the programme outlined above, substantial additional resources will be needed for extra staff with competence in the sciences, technical consultants, consultations on special themes and for publications and translations.

VI. A World-Wide Enquiry

The Department on Church and Society is not a research agency or a theological academy. It is rather a catalyst, an enabler for ecumenical reflection by people in many parts of the world who are attempting to understand more clearly how to mesh their Christian obedience and their life in rapidly changing societies.

You are warmly invited to contribute to and share in this world-wide enterprise of study, discussion and action. Please contact:

The World Council of Churches,
Department on Church and Society,
150 route de Ferney,
1211 Geneva 20,
Switzerland,

for more information on the purpose of the enquiry or on the methods for carrying out the project.

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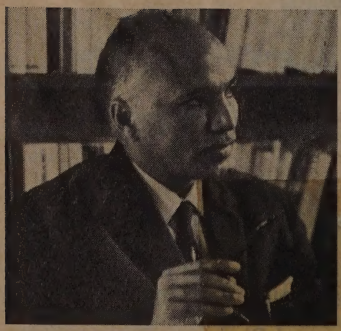

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